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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the educational needs and expectations of black families. It does three things: it describes what the rights and expectations of black families are (or ought to be) with respect to their education. It indicates in general terms how far blacks are from securing these educational rights and expectations, and finally it suggests what needs to be done to secure these rights and expectations. No distinctions are made between expectations and rights where education is concerned. There are five critical areas that substantially define what must be addressed successfully if equal educational opportunity is to be achieved: (1) the retardation (as measured by standardized tests) that begins about age three and accumulates to three or four years by the end of the 12th grade, (2) the high drop out rate, (3) the small number of blacks going on for higher education, (4) the large number who enroll in community colleges or institutions with questionable academic standards, and (5) the small number who qualify for admission to and who graduate from graduate and professional schools. Among the suggestions that are offered to remediate the bleak situation that exists are the following: (1) blacks have to make commitments and mobilize resources, (2) the initiative must be undertaken and sustained by blacks, (3) blacks must become more deeply involved in politics, (4) black scholars must make the black community aware of the educational deficits of blacks and they must devise ways to develop competitive competencies in black children, and (5) the Urban League, the N.A.A.C.P. and the Legal Defense Fund need to put their efforts on a division of labor basis into three urgent areas: education, employment, and housing. (Author/AM)

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EDUCATION: MEETING THE EXPECTATIONS OF BLACK FAMILIES: A RIGHT YET TO BE SECURED

by

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Prepared for Delivery at the National Urban League's Conference on the Black Family in Chicago, Illinois

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Education: Meeting the Expectations of
Black Families: A Right Yet to be Secured

This National Conference on the black family is long over due, but I am immensely pleased that it has finally been called and called under what I consider to be the right auspices. I do not need to remind this group that the major emphases in the past, where the black family is concerned, have been "long" on what has been called the pathologies of the black family and "short" on its strength -- short on therapies and viable ways and means of addressing the tough, pervasive, problems borne of poverty, discrimination, and oppression that affect the black family. But as I say, this conference is being conducted under the right auspices and I, therefore, have reason to hold high the hope, that during these next few days, that things will be said and done that will set into motion actions that will have profound, positive effects on the future of the black family.

The best "head start" that any child can have is to be born into a well-educated family that loves it; that provides it with the necessities for its physical development; that nurishes its sense of self-worth; that lifts its horizons and inspires high aspirations; that places a high premium on education; that sets emulative examples. But a family does not exist in a vaccuum. Thus,

the development of the children is affected by forces and conditions that extend far beyond the family -- including but not limited to the quality of the community in which the family lives; the role models in that community which have high visibility and, of course, the quality of the formal education the community provides, as public education goes a very long way toward determining whether the child will have access, later, to the kind of higher education that will help him sort out his aptitudes and talents and facilitate his efforts to develop them -- an education that will, when he becomes an adult, open the right doors at the right time.

As every racially literate person knows, the majority of the black families do not provide the kind of "head start" to which I have just alluded; nor do they live in the kind of communities that have the attributes which I have suggested -- all of which brings me to the topic I have been requested to address: "Education: Meeting the Expectations of Black Families: A Right Yet to be Secured."

In the effort to carry out my assignment, I shall do three things:

1. To make as explicit as I can, within the time allowed, what the rights and expectations of Black families are (or ought to be) with respect to education;

2. To indicate, in general terms, how far we are from securing these educational rights and expectations;

3. To suggest, again in general terms, what needs to be done to secure these rights and expectations.

Educational Rights and Expectations

For purposes of this presentation, I make no distinction between expectations and rights, where education is concerned. Every black family, as I view it, should expect its children to receive, as a right, the type of education that prepares them to function effectively in the rapidly changing society

in which they are destined to live -- indeed, the type of education that enables them to function to the level of their highest potential; every black family should expect its children to receive, as a right, the type of education that prepares them to negotiate the "system", in the sense that they are able to be competitive for both the plethora of educational and employment opportunities the society offers -- education that enables them to keep their options open until they find their appropriate place in the economy and the social order. To put this in more basic terms, black families should expect their children to receive, as a right, the quality of education in the public schools, grade by grade, including the urgently needed counselling, that assures a high school graduation rate at least equal to that of the larger community; the quality of the high school education that qualifies them for admission to selective colleges and universities, as well as the open door institutions and technical institutes in the proportion they are of the population; the quality of college education that assures them of graduation from college in numbers at least equal to the proportion they are of the population and that will quality them for admission to, and be graduated from graduate and professional schools in the same proportion they are of the population and that ultimately, their children's opportunities for employment and service, subsequent to their graduate or professional training, will be at least equal to the properties they are of the population. In the main, these are all rights yet to be secured. And any national program or effort that sets goals at lower levels will jeopardize the future of black families for an indeterminate number of years.

There is, to be sure, nothing unreasonable about the educational rights and expectations that I have delineated. There is absolutely no acceptable

reason why black families should tolerate a public school system that fails to motivate their children to complete their high school education; that fails to provide them with the counselling they so desperately need; that fails to prepare them to be competitive for admission and survival in education beyond the high school -- in numbers, at least, equal to their proportion of the population. In the final analysis, what is at issue is equal educational opportunity for Blacks in America -- equal in the unqualified sense of the term -- and nothing less will do. As an issue, equal educational opportunity, is by no means new. What is new, is that equal educational opportunity is more imperative than ever before. And because it is, it must be recognized as never before as a right yet to be secured.

Every educationally literate person knows that there are enormous disparities between the expectations and the reality where the education of Blacks is concerned -- disparities which have, to date, resisted successfully substantially all efforts to remove them. The landmark case of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, now some 23 years old, and all of the litigation that has followed in its wake, has had as its basic objective equal educational opportunity for Blacks; the Civil Rights Act of 1964, now 13 years old, and especially Title VI, has had as one of its major objectives equal educational opportunity for Blacks; the landmark case, Adams v. Richardson (now Califano) case, now six years old, has had as its objective, equal educational opportunity for Blacks; the more recent landmark case of Bakke v. the University of California, now about two years old, fundamentally involves equal educational opportunity for minorities, including Blacks. And there will, undoubtedly, be more cases and perhaps more laws.

There are, I think, five critical areas that substantially define what must be addressed successfully if equal educational opportunity is ever to be achieved:

1. The retardation, as measured by standardized instruments, that begins about grade three and accumulates, on the average, to three or four years by the end of the 12th grade, affecting, adversely, both access and choice where higher education of black youth is concerned;

2. The disproportionately high drop out rate -- two to three times the national average beginning about age 16, resulting in growing "army" of black youth with few, if any employable skills;

3. The disproportionately small number going on for higher education of any kind, along with a high attrition rate on the part of those who do enroll;

4. The disproportionately larger number who, by virtue of their assessed academic potential or both and their relative poverty, are enrolled in community colleges or four-year institutions with questionable academic standards.

5. The proportionately small number who qualify for admission to, and who are being graduated from, graduate and professional schools, limiting severely, the number of Blacks who can qualify for the higher opportunities for which graduate or professional training are required.

Given the situation I have just described, no one should be surprised that less than three percent of the nation's Ph.D.'s are Black; that less than two percent of the nation's engineers are Black; that less than four percent of the nation's lawyers are Black; that less than two percent of the nation's MBA's are Black; that less than five percent of the Nation's physicians are Black,and the list could go on and on. And the black community, as we know, constitutes roughly 12 percent of the nation's populations which means that all the percentages I have just enumerated must be multiplied two to five times before parity can be reached and this may take 10 to 20 years or even longer.

The bottom line of all of this is that, taken in the aggregate, these serious inequities are not only jeopardizing the strength of the black family currently but for generations yet to come.

The high school drop-out rate, when added to expulsion rate and the "push-out" rate, is a major cause of the 60 percent unemployment rate which the National Urban League estimates to be a real unemployment rate among black youth and who, in their effort to survive, are contributing more than their share to the nation's crime rate and the Nation's prison population. In addition, the great majority of these youth will probably reach full adulthood without ever having had a meaningful work experience and while they will undoubtedly propagate their kind, there is little chance that they will, in the foreseeable future, head stable families.

The majority of those who manage to finish high school but who do not go on for higher education, or some type of vocational or technical training for which there is a strong demand, are just about condemned to work for the rest of their lives at wages close to poverty line levels. Their chances of being unemployed -- the last to be hired and the first to be fired -- are, of course, extremely high. They contribute a major share of the 1.5 million which the National Urban League estimated to be the number of umemployed Blacks in 1976 and which is probably larger in 1977. And we know that wide-spread poverty and massive unemployment jeopardize the stability of the black family and diminish its strength as a national resource. The situation, as we know all too well, forces black families to live in indescribably poor, over-crowded, housing in ghettos that exascerbate the worst in human behavior -- thereby making it far more difficut for the schools to do their jobs.

In addition to all of this, our failure to have our full share of Blacks in skilled trades, the professions, the prestigious jobs in government,

business and industry, not only forces the great majority of Blacks to congregate in the more menial, low-paying positions but deprives thousands upon thousands of children of good role models close enough and visible enough to be emulated.

Approaches to Solutions

Almost anyone can do the litany that sets the critical problems in bold relief and that describes the pain. The tough job is to suggest some viable ways and means of dealing with the critical problems. In this connection, I have a few comments to make and I hold high the hope that more concrete suggestions and recommendations will be developed here over the next few days:

1. Nothing of any consequence where equality of educational opportunity is concerned is going to happen until we Blacks make local and national commitments to make equal educational opportunity a reality -- the test of which will be the mobilization of our resources -- political, economic, educational and legal -- and to come to grips with the critical problems. And there is no point in making commitments and mobilizing resources unless they are going to be brought to bear on the real problems. This means calling a spade a spade; facing up to the hard facts and taking our share of the blame.

2. The problems involved in achieving equal educational opportunity cannot be solved by Blacks alone. Their solution must involve the large society, especially, government. But the initiative must be undertaken and sustained by Blacks. These problems cannot be dealt with in isolation, for they are enormously compiled, as I have indicated, by the employment problems and by the housing problems.

3. In order to involve government in the problem, Blacks must become much more deeply involved, than ever before, in politics. One of the sadest stories I have read in a long time appeared in The New York Times on October 30. The headline said: "Black Voters of New York Do Not Constitute a Voting Block." The story went on to say that Blacks constituted 25 percent of the population of the city and only a third of the eligible black voters voted in the recent city elections; that only five (11 percent) of the 43 member City Council were Black; that of the States 39 member Congressional delegation, only two (5%) are Black; that

while Blacks constitute 13 percent of the States population, only four (six percent) of the 60 Senators are Black. And the story went on. Without deep political involvement, we are not likely to influence even Boards of Education, not to mention other levels of government. The politically weak, for whatever reason, are generally ignored by politicans, however just their cause.

3. Our Black educators, through their research, their writings and their speaking must keep us aware of the educational deficits that characterize the education of Blacks in America and must devise ways and means of developing competitive competencies in our black children and youth.

4. The Urban League, the N.A.A.C.P. and the Legal Defense Fund need to put their total efforts,on a division of labor basis, into these three urgent areas -- education, employment, and housing. They should monitor the situation as it pertains to these critical areas by frequent updating of the relevant facts and by helping to keep the pressure on those who have the power to effect the necessary changes.

Those of you who are old enough to remember Horace Cayton's and St. Clair Drakes's Black Metropolis will recall that it said that the five basic life activities of Blacks were:

- staying alive
- getting ahead
- having fun
- praising God
- advancing the race

These activities, I suspect, still consume the energies of black people. But where "getting ahead" and "advancing the race" are concerned, the ways and means have not always been clear to the great majority of them. What we need to do is to put education, employment and housing at the top of the black agenda -- to do everything we can to make as certain as possible that every black person from 9 to 90 understands their crucial importance. For without equal opportunity where education, employment and housing are concerned, there can be no equality

of opportunity for Blacks in America, nor any realistic hope of improving their conditions of life -- for getting ahead and advancing the race.